VZCZCXRO5123
RR RUEHBI RUEHLMC
DE RUEHLM #0847/01 1651147
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 141147Z JUN 07
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6260
INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0463
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0198
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3836
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 7181
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 5288
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1086
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 3907
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 1131
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2993
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 7767
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 5427
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO 0252
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2124
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E.O 12958: N/A
TAGS: EAID SOCI PHUM PINS PREF PGOV CE
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: EASTERN MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE ON THE
ROLE OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN THE SRI LANKA PEACE
PROCESS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: USAID Mission Director met with
community leaders representing the Peace Secretariat for
Muslims from the three districts of the Eastern Province
-- Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara. Participants in
the the meeting, chaired by Mr. M.I.M. Mohideen, the
body?s Secretary-General, discussed the impact of the
escalating conflict on the Muslim community in the
Eastern Province, the lack of security for Muslims, the
state of the economy in the East, and the perception
that Muslims are excluded from peace talks and other
national level discussions that affect their future.
Failure to address Muslims? legitimate grievances could
result in their adopting a more militant position ? a
fact that was clearly made in the discussion. End
Summary.

¶2. (SBU) USAID Director met May 9 with members of the
Muslim Peace Secretariat from the three districts of the
East. Participants identified their primary grievances
as: the lack of participation of representatives of the
Muslim community in peace negotiations; the lack of
protection of human rights and the need to re-establish
the rule of law in the East; and the inequitable
distribution of aid to both tsunami- and conflict-
affected internally displaced persons. They highlighted
a significant deterioration in Muslim?Tamil community
relations which, if left unchecked, could escalate into
a secondary conflict in the East.

Background: Sri Lanka?s Muslim Community and the
Conflict
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¶3. (SBU) In the Eastern Province, the majority of
Muslims depend on farming and fishing for their

livelihood. During the 25-year conflict, Muslims have
been forced to leave the Jaffna Peninsula, Mannar, and
other areas of the Northern Province. Many have settled
in the Eastern Province. The Peace Secretariat for
Muslims has identified 96,000 acres of land that has
been or currently is under the control of the Liberation
Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or the Karuna Group that
were previously Muslim lands. Muslims in the East have
found themselves targeted by the LTTE, and, more
recently, the Karuna Group.

¶4. (SBU) Muslims constitute one-third of the population
of the Eastern Province and are the largest ethnic group
in the Ampara District, the area worst affected by the
December 2004 tsunami. The majority of the Muslim
community in the East lives along the coastal belt from
Pottuvil in the south to Muttur in the north. This area
suffered the highest numbers of fatalities as a result
of the tsunami. Meeting participants noted the lack of
significant progress on tsunami rehabilitation projects
in the East compared with the Sinhalese-dominated South.

¶5. (SBU) The main players in Sri Lanka's conflict have
been the Tamil minority seeking a separate state or
regional autonomy within a federal state and the
Sinhalese majority who have rejected the latter and are
not wholly supportive of the former. Meeting
participants noted that Muslims have become a forgotten
element in this entrenched conflict. Their community
has suffered from discrimination, politically motivated
violence, and massacres.

¶6. (SBU) Unlike other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka who
define themselves in terms of language, culture, and
religion, the identity of Sri Lankan Muslims is defined
primarily by religious belief. Historically, there has
been debate among Sinhalese and Tamil politicians and
academics over the identity of the Muslim community,
with some arguing that Muslims are Tamils who follow a
different religion. Nevertheless, there is an
unequivocal belief among Sri Lankan Muslims that they
constitute a separate and clearly defined community.

¶7. (SBU) In post-independence Sri Lanka, Muslim
political leaders were represented by a broad cross
section of political parties. Traditionally, the pro-
business Muslim elites who entered politics downplayed
ethnic issues and promoted policies favored by the
entrepreneurial sector. In the 1970s, increased
educational opportunities in the country led to the
emergence of professional elites from the East. The
longstanding economic grievances of eastern Muslims were
exacerbated with the onset of ethnic conflict in the
1980s. This led to the creation of the Sri Lanka Muslim
Congress (SLMC) in 1986, the first Muslim-based
political party in Sri Lanka, headed by M.H.M. Ashraff.

¶8. (SBU) Sri Lanka's electoral system is based on
proportional representation which gave the SLMC a
disproportionately large role in the creation of
governing coalitions. Despite having a relatively small
voter base, the party was able to deliver benefits to
its supporters in the form of government jobs in
ministries controlled by party leaders, establish a
university in the Ampara District with a predominantly
Muslim student body, and begin the construction of a
port in Oruvil, a Muslim-dominated town in Ampara
District. In 2000, after the death of the SLMC's
leader, his widow, Ferial Ashraff, and SLMC deputy
leader Rauf Hakeem were unable to agree on who should
lead the party. The resulting split led to the further
fracturing of the Muslim polity with individual
parliamentarians leaving the party and establishing
their own political parties. Currently, there are

eleven Muslim political parties in Parliament.

USAID Support for the Peace Secretariat for Muslims
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¶9. (U) Through the USAID Sri Lanka peace support
project ?Civic Foundation for Peace?, a memorandum of
understanding was negotiated between Minister Rauf
Hakeem, leader of the SLMC, and Mrs. Ferial Ashraff,
leader of the National Unity Alliance (NUA), to create
the Peace Secretariat for Muslims (PSM). The goals of
the PSM are to promote a consensual approach among
Muslim political leaders to advocate for the needs of
their community in this conflict-affected region and to
promote the views of the Muslim community on the
peaceful resolution of Sri Lanka's conflict. With USAID
support, the PSM has established regional offices in
Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, Galle, and Puttalam.
Each office has established a committee of community
leaders to monitor human security issues and participate
in a district-based Peace Assembly with representatives
nominated by the SLMC and NUA. A cross section of the
PSM's network of community leaders from Trincomalee,
Batticaloa, and Ampara met on May 9 in Ampara with the
USAID Mission Director.

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Muslim Community Leaders Highlight Concerns

¶10. (SBU) One of the primary concerns raised by the
Muslim community leaders was the perceived indifference
of the government to the needs of the Muslim community
whose members were victims of the tsunami and are
adversely affected by the ongoing conflict. The Muslim
community, they said, directs its anger not only at the
Government of Sri Lanka, but also at the donor community
and non-government organizations, which are viewed as
having failed to provide support in a timely manner. Of
particular importance to the Muslim community are
programs to promote peace, combat corruption, protect
human rights, and increase opportunities for livelihoods
and training for unemployed youth, particularly those
who did not enter the university system.

¶11. (SBU) The President of the All Mosques Federation
in the Eastern Province, Al Haj Moulavi S.L.M. Hannifa,
presented a paper on behalf of his organization
highlighting the expectations of the Muslim community.
These included:

-- Recognition of the North-East Muslims as a distinct
nation with a separate and distinct identity, culture,
traditions and religion;
-- Recognition of an identified Muslim homeland in the
North and East,i.e.non-contiguous administrative areas
in a unified Sri Lanka;
-- Recognition of the inalienable right of self-
determination of the Muslims;
-- Resettlement of the Muslims forcibly evicted from the
Northern Province their places of origin in Mannar and
Jaffna;
-- Establishment of a Commission for Racial Equality to
address the grievances of the minorities;
-- Re-establishment of the rule of law in the North and
East; and
-- The inclusion of North-East Muslims in future peace
negotiations.

¶12. (SBU) The discussion highlighted the lack of media
outlets that are sympathetic to the concerns of the
Muslim community. The Tamil language media are
primarily focused on the Tamil minority and do not
adequately address developments in the East from the
perspective of the Muslim community. An elected member

of the Pottuvil municipality emphasized that peace was
the only way to ensure sustainable development and that
the devolution of power was the only "honorable solution
acceptable to all based on geographic and demographic
factors." He noted the prevalence of fear in all
communities in the East as a result of massacres of
civilians that have occurred in the past.

¶13. (SBU) Participants pointed to an increasing level
of distrust between the Muslim and Tamil communities.
Pamphlets such as the Ceylon Muslim News, which is
published by the North-East Muslim Peace Assembly,
highlight human rights violations perpetrated by both
the LTTE and the Karuna Group in the North and East. In
the October 2006 edition of the Ceylon Muslim News, an
article entitled "The Politics of Merged North-East"
stated, "the forces of Tamil nationalism were the
gravest human rights violator in Sri Lanka." The

participants expressed frustration and anger at the
targeting of the Muslim community in the conflict in the
East; more recently, the Karuna Group has targeted
Muslim traders and entrepreneurs by imposing "taxes" and
other forms of extortion.

¶14. (SBU) The community leaders expressed the view that
the Muslim political leadership was silenced by offers
of positions within the government, creating a dearth of
effective advocates. In this context, the Peace
Secretariat for Muslims is key to promoting a national

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institution that can broadly advocate on behalf of the
conflict-affected Muslim community as well as rebuild
the credibility of Muslim political leaders in the East.

A Forum for Community Leaders to Highlight Concerns
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¶15. (U) In the context of Sri Lanka's ongoing conflict
and the need to promote its peaceful resolution, USAID
programming will focus on building upon the Muslim
community's often unpublicized assistance to displaced
Tamil communities and use common interests such as the
continuing needs of tsunami and conflict-affected IDPs
to promote reconciliation and cooperation. New USAID
programs will utilize shared interests, such promoting
human rights and good governance, combating corruption,
improving livelihoods, and targeting unemployed youth
through workforce development opportunities.

¶16. (U) Through the PSM and community-based fora
situated in the East, USAID will monitor the needs of
all three communities in the Eastern Province; provide
technical assistance and training to provincial and
local government officials to promote transparent,
accountable, and responsive decentralized institutions;
and support language training for government officials
in the East to ensure access to services by all
communities.

¶17. (U) The PSM will be supported in developing broader
and more inclusive civil society networks within this
community and beginning the process of engagement with
all Muslim politicians to promote a consensus in
political fora that are tasked with developing a
political solution to the conflict.

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